



MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

THE **OUTSIDE** IS IN US ALL.

Meeting Date: August 13, 2020

Agenda Item: Chip Creek Conservation Easement, Region 4

Action Needed: Endorsement **Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 5 minutes

Background: The proposed Chip Creek Conservation Easement, northwest of Loma, is nearly 23,600 acres of mostly contiguous land and includes 5,500 acres of DNRC and 1,425 acres of BLM leases. Total project area is approximately 30,000 acres. The property is bordered by 7 miles of the Marias River and consists of native prairie grasslands, shrub-grasslands, prairie breaks, and riparian areas. Approximately 6,000 acres of previously farmed land has been recently returned to permanent grassland. This is one of the largest remaining blocks of native grasslands in the Golden Triangle. In this area, the greatest risk to native grassland systems is conversion to cropland. The area is a stronghold for antelope and mule and white-tailed deer. Two active sage-grouse leks are located on and near the property. Other upland game birds include sharp-tailed grouse, pheasant, gray partridge, and Merriam's turkey. The property provides habitat for many nongame species including black-tailed prairie dogs and associated species like burrowing owls. Long-billed curlews and other grassland bird and mammalian species inhabit the property.

The proposed conservation easement would protect nearly 24,000 acres of native habitat in perpetuity, provide for and improve functioning wildlife habitat, prevent conversion to agriculture in an area where that has been occurring, and greatly enhance public access and recreation.

Public Involvement Process & Results: FWP has not sought formal public review of this proposal. Upon endorsement by the commission, FWP would conduct an initial public evaluation. Depending on the response, FWP may proceed further with an environmental analysis including additional public involvement and review.

Alternatives and Analysis: Proposal alternatives and analysis would be conducted by FWP if this proposal receives commission endorsement.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale: FWP recommends the commission endorse this proposal allowing the department to further develop and conduct associated analysis, working toward a conservation outcome because of the importance of conserving this land, including the high resource values and public recreational opportunities.

Proposed Motion: I move the commission endorse the proposed Chip Creek Conservation Easement, allowing FWP to conduct further due diligence, analysis and public review.